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## Merab Mamardashvili's Cultural Understanding: Fascism or the Spinal Cord?

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*The article addresses the Georgian philosopher's Merab Mamardashvili's statement that "fascism is a triumph of culture" and discusses Mamardashvili's cultural understanding. The work contrasts two seemingly contradictory characterizations of culture provided by the Georgian philosopher himself – on one hand he equalizes the culture with fascism and Nazism, but on the other hand compares it to the spinal cord that serves as a necessary basis for ensuring of humanity. The article raises an issue of a fine and not fully detectable boundary between the place where the culture is a man-made and humanity forming mechanism, and where it becomes something un-topicalized – a bondage.*

*Keywords: Merab Mamardashvili, Rihards Kulis, culture.*

### Introduction

Philosopher of Georgian origin Merab Mamardashvili (1930-1990) was a peculiar phenomenon of Soviet Union and Soviet philosophy. Due to his manner of philosophizing as well as Western orientation of his beliefs, during last decades of his life he gains lots of adherents and followers. One of them is Latvian philosopher and a disciple of Mamardashvili Andris Rubenis in his memoirs writes: "M. Mamardashvili disclosed to us – people who listened to his lectures, participated in collective seminars and conferences, etc. – a type of thinker that we had only read about in philosophy textbooks, namely, he scarcely wrote but thought a lot, furthermore, he did so in public." (Rubenis, 1994, 7) Because of this aspect Mamardashvili is also called a Georgian Socrates.

Specific of Georgian philosopher's thinking in public is an aspect that entails certain consequences that are mainly associated with various misunderstandings and a question: How to understand the philosophy of this philosopher? The difficulties are caused by the fact that Mamardashvili's mental activity is not characterized by a systematic, academic presentation; it is caused by his style of philosophizing which is characterized, as mentioned above, by the public thinking (there are exceptions to be mentioned<sup>1</sup>).

As we move closer to the basic question proposed in the title of this article – on Mamardashvili's understanding of culture – it should be noted that such interest stems directly from the outlined difficulties. They, in turn, arise from the fact that main part of Mamardashvili's textual body consists of documentations of his

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lectures and public performances. Written word differs from the spoken one not only by the form of expression, but also by means of expression, accents, pace, etc. Mamardashvili's lectures largely were a free improvisation. This means, first, that the language of account may not be completely perfected and it lacks analysis of all angles and aspects, second, the emphasis in the account is placed mainly according to the placement of the topic, and, third, the account can contain different departures, emotional expressions, or even provocations. These are exactly the factors that often make us look for further explanations when we read certain passages of Mamardashvili's lectures and readings.

Based on the abovementioned difficulties, it has to be pointed out that the aim of this paper is to try and grasp the Georgian philosopher's understanding of culture by turning to explanation of one confusing passage of Mamardashvili's philosophy, focusing specifically on the question of relationship between the man and culture.

### **Culture – it is an essence of fascism**

The question of Mamardashvili's understanding of culture was raised by Latvian philosopher Rihards Kūlis during "Readings of Mamardashvili" that took place in Riga in 2010. His paper "Cultural a priori: shackles or freedom?" that he presented during the readings unfortunately is not published, it remains just as an audio files in the private archives of enthusiasts.

Rihards Kūlis structured his speech around Mamardashvili's provocative statement, quoted by heart and paraphrased, and it sounded like this: "culture – it is an essence of fascism." Most likely Kūlis paraphrases the passage that Georgian philosopher said in the lecture course that is published under a title "Essay On Contemporary European Philosophy" (*Очерк современной*

*европейской философии*). Precisely this statement is following: "Machines that operated among other things through symbols, organizing mass will, mass consciousness, engaging mass energy, were fascism or Nazism. This phenomenon is a triumph of culture." (Мамардашвили, 2010, 269)

In his speech Kūlis is not inviting to take philosopher's statements literally, he points out that they beg for a question: "but what did he mean by this?" Kūlis believes that it is quite easy to find an answer to this question. Latvian philosopher explains it through the analogy with statement of French existentialist Jean Paul Sartre: "I would gladly burn Mona Lisa." (Caprē, 1973) But what has Mona Lisa done to Sartre? If Mona Lisa becomes a shackle, if she confines our free active spirit, our creative aspirations, then we have to get rid of it. It is similar with Mamardashvili. If something in the human existence, in the world that is created by the man himself, becomes a bondage, then the culture in certain form of expression is totalitarianism, fascism.

Based on abovementioned Mamardashvili's characterization of culture we will use philosopher's own statements and through them we will try and understand what exactly was meant by the provocative statement "culture – it is an essence of fascism" and what is Mamardashvili's understanding of culture.

So, as we know, Nazism and fascism was ideologies of 20th century that represented racism, anti-Semitism, totalitarianism, etc., that in the end lead to the holocaust and greatly contributed to the beginning of the most devastating tragedy of humanity – Second World War. It is obvious that by equating the culture with these ideologies the word "culture" acquires a negative connotation through a peculiar overturn.

Mamardashvili approximates culture to the actualized similarity with ideology based on understanding of culture as some organizing,

regulating mechanism. Human thought and beliefs are directed by the culture just as by the ideology. In another words, for Mamardashvili culture is some normative dependency. He explains: "Culture is an organization of mass states, emotions, thoughts, will, etc., through the man-made symbols." (Мамардашвили, 2010, 269) Both ideology and culture organizes these mass states, however, there is a difference – ideological allegations usually are defined explicitly, but normative dependencies of the culture are much deeper, subtler, more refined; they acquire reflected description only through the work of culturologists, philosophers and other intellectuals.

A fact that Mamardashvili makes us look to the culture skeptically, is a question of individuality of a person that can not confine with the process of enculturation, socialization, absorption of some, most likely, non-reflected norms

Opposed to these processes we can identify three interrelated concepts that are important for Mamardashvili's philosophy – thought, effort, and transcendence.

With a thought Mamardashvili understands some specifically ordered state or act within a person. It expresses as each man's personal, unique inner experience. In the lecture course "Essay On Contemporary European Philosophy" Mamardashvili identifies two opposites – thinking and by-thinking<sup>2</sup> (it is interesting that term *by-thinking* is used as a synonymous with the word *culture*). He says: "Culture – it is the way how we can acquire already existing thoughts according to our abilities." (Мамардашвили, 2010, 267) By-thinking is an act when we think within framework of some pre-created and pre-existing beliefs. We, for example, can speak about Plato and Platonism, about Hegel and Hegelians, Kant and Kantians, etc. So there is some set of beliefs or ideological essence that has followers

and accordingly, through their following, if they don't transform some basic concepts, they are by-thinking. And similarly, the culture, as man-made symbols, prescribes process of enculturation and as a result – by-thinking.

Whereas speaking about the thought, philosopher explains: "In the nature state and act of thought, state of consciousness does not contain potentiality of continuity of this state. [...] If some act is real, if some thought is real, complete, then accordingly it is supported and continuously renewed by the will." (Мамардашвили, 1993, 42) In another words, the thought is held in place by the effort. Thought is a personal experience, and a man is condemned to always fall out of this state of experience. He can return to it only through the effort, through some special strain of consciousness.

All human qualities and man-made values are things that man creates as a result of his actions. Language, customs, virtue, art, etc. are all creations of man that according to Mamardashvili do not exist by some mechanisms inherent in nature. Man creates and sustains it all just like a thought – through the effort.

However, we could ask: Why do we need this thought, why do we need the culture and effort – why does a man need such a hassle if it requires tension? Mamardashvili answers: "A man has some increments – through them, living with them, taking care of them a man can just be a man, but a man that is given to himself, with his biological, natural ability to understand, with his activities and so on, a man – a scrap, a nothing." (Мамардашвили, 2010, 270) Namely, Mamardashvili connects the effort with a human existence in ontological level, showing that there is no human existence without a human work. He explains: "Accordingly, the ontological structure of existence reproduces itself only with the involvement of our effort, when, first, we become different from what we had been before,

and, secondly, this results in continuous self-continuation.” (Мамардашвили, 2011, 104-105) So the effort provides not just the continuity of a man and of human existence, but also provides its transformation, conversion.

But here we come to the deep connection between effort and transcendence (Latin “*transcendentia*” – passing over, crossing over). In his lecture course “Introduction to Philosophy” Mamardashvili identifies transcendence as an activity that expresses both philosophy and a man. He points out: “The conditions that we put under ourselves to become humans are to be found through the act when humans go out of their natural frames and boundaries. This escape from the natural, naturally regulated course of events, this act came to be called the transcendence.”

When Mamardashvili says *natural*, he is not speaking of freshness of meadows just after the rainfall or chirrup of birds deep in woods. The difference between natural and unnatural or human activity is expressed in passivity and activity. According to Mamardashvili, everything that happens passively happens naturally. For example, on physiological level such natural activity is heartbeat. A man does not have to put some specific effort for it to happen – it happens passively. But, speaking of human qualities, natural is, for example, fear, laziness, as well as evil (as such). Of course, here we can challenge and debate if passivity and activity can be a criterion and foundation for speaking in ethical categories, separating good from evil, but main Mamardashvili's basic thought is that evil is something that happens of its own, but good presumes effort. Namely, everything that presumes intentional human activity or effort is unnatural.

We can also speak of the effort to understand ourselves and the situation as well as to overcome it, when we think of existence of a persona in some culture as well as in certain circumstances

in the history of civilization. Seemingly a man and his actions could be illustratively explained in such historically-social trend. Considering adherence of this individual to some certain community and its customs on the one hand and certain socio-economical situation and interests on the other hand, these factors would have to determine one's beliefs, worldview, values, attitudes, etc.. But, as we know, it does not work this way. Mamardashvili believes that a man is characterized by the “personal activity”, namely, an activity that is undertaken rather on one's risk and responsibility and not dictated by the circumstances; an activity that doesn't have another justification, just the activity itself. Speaking in Marxist terms, it means crossing over the objective historical circumstances. It is similar with philosophy, art, and culture. Therefore Mamardashvili explains: “In 20th century exists the problem of “anti-culture” – that is to say, meaning that philosophy is anti-cultural activity, thought is anti-cultural activity, science is anti-cultural activity, personality is anti-cultural phenomenon.” (Мамардашвили, 2010, 268) All these activities are anti-cultural for they transcend the actual givenness, cross over the place we are thrown, overcome obsolete traditions, etc. It is a process of active creation where Mamardashvili brings the individual and his activity to the front.

In this context, understanding that culture can become a bondage, a pattern that fully forms man's thinking, perception, activity, etc., as well as potentially excludes creativity, in Mamardashvili's view, it is necessary to overcome it. Moreover, it has to be pointed out that, as we have already ascertained, comparison between culture and Nazism was drawn by analogy with ideology and its ability to incline beliefs of people and their actions in some certain direction. Corresponding situation can be considered quite illustrative, since it clearly demonstrates what

absurdity, nonsense and horror can result from the by-thinking.

But it has to be said that in such light culture acquires very negative connotation, it is put in despicable position. From such radicalized view could stem various absurd consequences. What are we to do with the intellectual heritage that could form, say, some standards of literary language or philosophical thought? What are we to do with Rainis, Ojārs Vācietis<sup>3</sup>, Teodors Celms, Zenta Mauriņa<sup>4</sup> and many others? Cover them with spittle, burn their works, if this tradition and cultural heritage is so evil? We can suppose that it is not likely that Mamardashvili would call for such actions; it would also be foolhardy to assume that an adequate person could think so radically if his goal would not have been to shock. Here is the right place to remember specifics of Mamardashvili's philosophy illustrated in the introduction and peculiarities that follow it, therefore, looking for a broader point of view and for more clarity, let us turn to other passages of Mamardashvili's philosophy.

### Culture as a spinal cord

In his lecture course "Vilnius Lectures on Social Philosophy" (*Вильнюсские лекции по социальной философии*) or "Essay on Physical Metaphysics" (*Опыт физической метафизики*) philosopher explains: "Rights, virtues, art and so on – these are all complex products of civilization, inventions, and as such they are to be considered organs of our life. In them, if we have them, certain human qualities are formed." (Мамардашвили, 2009, 88) The question about the differences and content of notions of "civilization" and "culture" is an issue for cultural theorists, it belongs to another elaboration. Turning to Mamardashvili it has to be said that philosopher himself in this context brings to front more general notions, such as "second nature" or "artificial nature", by them meaning results of human activity in contradiction

to the "first nature", natural things. Speaking of denoting the man-made world, Mamardashvili points out: "There are dozens of names that are used in the social sciences, journalism and similar nice trades, and I will not use them because it is an endless theme in itself, but we need philosophical problems." (Мамардашвили, 2010, 359) Mamardashvili distances himself from the reeling of special nuances in concepts, bringing forward the notion of human effort and results that follow from it that can also be named by such concepts as civilization, culture, etc.. Consequently, based on these considerations, it would be justified to presume that by the *products of civilization* mentioned in the beginning of chapter, we can also understand the culture.

If we compare the example mentioned in the beginning of chapter to the statements that were analyzed in the previous chapter where culture was equaled to the fascism and Nazism, we can clearly see very sharp re-orientation of value judgments. Culture is no more compared with one of the biggest disasters of 20th century; it is, on the contrary, raised to an honorable position, indicating that it is essentially responsible for human qualities.

Mamardashvili reads the lecture course "Essay On Physical Metaphysics" (1981) only two years after the course "Essay On Contemporary European Philosophy" (1978-1979). It begs for a question: Is it possible that during this short period of time such sharp changes of the value orientation took place? It is doubtful.

Let us try and understand what Mamardashvili meant by the statement from the "Essay On Physical Metaphysics" and how it can be consistent with passages on similarities between culture and fascism and Nazism.

Elsewhere in Vilnius lectures Mamardashvili says: "I want to say that art, philosophy and so on are not to be considered just an addition in our overall pragmatic life, but rather organs of creation

and reproduction of life.” (Мамардашвили, 2009, 84-85) It has to be said that quotation expresses quite identical idea as the passage that is mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, but in the further development it is supplemented as these organs that create human life, besides art and philosophy mentioning statehood, morals, legal system, science, etc..

Concerning the “organ” metaphor, Mamardashvili refers to the philosopher Carl Marx (Мамардашвили, 2009) whose ideas, as it is known, were also influenced by the naturalist Charles Darwin. Similarly as in a man each organ carries out its own function like heart drives blood, lungs supply the body with oxygen, every distinct social form also carries out its own function (art has its own function, science has its own, etc.), making the world habitable for a man. All organs together create a system; in this system man is given an opportunity to coin relationships with others, to acquire his own experience (to individualize) and, after all, to become a man in general.

So here we are not speaking of some social form or, as mentioned above, a set of products of civilization on the one hand and of process of socialization, of enculturation in it on the other hand. Without socialization in some certain society, its culture, we would have to speak about so-called “Mowgli syndrome.” A man grown up among animals would act like an animal. This being would not be able to perform normal social interaction; it would have limited ability of speech and would be mentally underdeveloped.

Since there is no other way for a man to acquire his human qualities as through socialization, Mamardashvili theoretically calls culture the spinal cord. In this context term “spinal cord” is used as a metaphor, contrasting them to the brain. One of the spinal cord's main functions is related to the reflectory function, providing for the somatic reflexes, as well as affecting

vegetative reflexes that in their turn affect heartbeat, velocity of breath, blood pressure, as well as activity of digestive processes. Culture in creation of a man as a being that is involved in the creation of the society performs similar function as the spinal cord in a man, namely, coordination and enforcement of some non-reflected and normally un-controlled, absolutely necessary but insufficient basic functions. In this context, speaking of culture, Mamardashvili specifically brings to the front its organizing function. He explains: “Culture is the existence of formal and ultimately mechanized institutes, norms, laws, and some possibility for people to live together, to reproduce; otherwise they would devour each other.” (Мамардашвили, 2010, 268) In other words, without culture there would be chaos, disorder, barbarism that would make normal life impossible. Philosopher stresses that function of state and culture is not to create heaven on earth, but to serve as this spinal cord, support of the peace and order. Through the customs, moral norms, forms of government, etc. is created such environment where man can feel that his life is relatively safe. How he subsequently manages his personal life is just his own responsibility.

Brain, in comparison with the spinal cord, is something of a higher value (but they can not exist without each other). With their help man tries to acquire some experience from the state he is thrown into and to extract some meaning from it. Mamardashvili points out: “In a man there are some fate-defining things that depend not on the environment that I called artificial, not on culture, not on the organization of society, but on the personal development of a man.” (Мамардашвили, 2010, 359-360) Namely, Mamardashvili puts the biggest emphasis on the individual himself, on his own fear, risk and effort to overcome it. As it was clarified in the previous chapter, it is not enough just to absorb some outer humanistic norms and ideals, given

by the enculturation and socialization. Man has to personally acquire his personal experience, his inner acts, his states of thought and reflection. But reflection even etymologically from the Latin word *reflexio* (looking back) assumes existence of some distanced view. We turn back to the culture, turn back to ourselves, and through this action we simultaneously perform act of transcendence. Through such acts man raises up to the individual, personal and alive acts that, according to Mamardashvili, are the only possibility of a real existence.

### Conclusion

According to the analysis given above, we can conclude that Mamardashvili's view on the culture is two-fold. On the one hand, he theoretically calls it the "spinal cord" that performs the function of support serving as a provider of spiritual, moral, and legitimate values, artificially created as a result of long-term human activity, but on the other hand, Mamardashvili brings forward the individual, his individuality and personal responsibility for these things, indicating that one should not confine himself to acquisition of some pre-created values and beliefs; that, on the

contrary, one has to overcome, transcend them, thus acknowledging development, creativity and life.

Russian philosopher Natalia Malishkina in her dissertation "Philosophical Teaching of M. K. Mamardashvili on the Man and Society" (*Философское учение М.К. Мамардашвили о человеке и обществе*) gives very precise characterization of Mamardashvili's understanding of culture. She writes: "Man is not to consider the culture inherent in society a guarantee for acquisition of moral values, for automatic acquiring of them; moreover, culture does not emerge by itself, without human effort. Man correlates with the culture in this way or another, but the level of correlation depends on the effort of personality." (Малышкина, 2005, 101)

The two conflicting characterizations of culture mentioned in this paper as well as in Malishkina's quotation, poses a question of the fine and not fully detectable boundary between the place where the culture is a man-made and humanity forming mechanism, and where it becomes something un-topicalized – a bondage.

<sup>1</sup> During his lifetime only three Mamardashvili's books are published, and only one of them – "*Формы и содержание мышления*" (Forms and Content of Thinking) is initially mentioned as a written text. Other two – "*Классический и неклассический идеалы рациональности*" (Classical and Non-Classical Ideals of Rationality) and "*Как я понимаю философию*" (How I Understand Philosophy) – were published based on documentations of his lectures and different performances. During his lifetime was also published a book that he co-authored with his friend and colleague Alexander Pyatigorsky "*Символ и сознание*" (Symbol and Consciousness) as well as several smaller texts. During nineteen seventies Mamardashvili completes a book "*Стрела познания*" (An Arrow of Cognition), but it is published only after philosopher's death.

<sup>2</sup> In the lecture course "Esthetic of Thinking" (*Эстетика мышления*) Mamardashvili makes another distinction, separating the thought from the copy of thought. Philosopher indicates that a man is inseparably connected with the linguistic reality that allows him to create copies of thought or simulacres meaning some phrases expressed in words that bears resemblance with a thought, but nevertheless are fake. According to Mamardashvili, thought is an inner experience that can not always be articulated linguistically. (Mamardashvili, 2002)

<sup>3</sup> Rainis (1865-1929) was a famous Latvian poet and playwright, and Ojārs Vācietis (1933 – 1983) – remarkable Latvian poet.

<sup>4</sup> Teodors Celms (1893 – 1989) was influential Latvian philosopher, developer of the phenomenological trend in Latvia, but Zenta Mauriņa (1897 – 1978) – Latvian writer, translator and thinker.

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## **Понимание культуры**

### **Мераба Константиновича Мамардашвили:**

### **фашизм или спинной мозг?**

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*В статье, обращаясь к выражению грузинского философа Мераба Константиновича Мамардашвили «Фашизм - это торжество культуры», рассмотрено понимание культуры Мамардашвили. В работе противопоставлены две, кажущиеся противоречивыми, характеристики культуры, в которых, с одной стороны, культура приравнивается к фашизму и нацизму, а с другой – сравнивается со спинным мозгом, который служит необходимым основанием обеспечения человечности. В статье поставлен вопрос о тонкой и неуловимой грани между тем, где культура является механизмом, созданным человеком, и где механизмом, его создающим, и где она становится чем-то нетематическим – оковами.*

*Ключевые слова: Мераб Мамардашвили, Рихард Кулис, культура.*

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